

Almost Everything

The secret of all effective originality in advertising is not the creation of new and tricky words and pictures, but one of putting familiar words and pictures into new relationships.

- Leo Burnett

Every few days I open my mailbox and I am greeted by a large bundle of flyers from a variety of establishments. Within these flyers are a multitude of everyday objects vying for my attention: a new chocolate stained maple bedroom set from Sears to replace my non existent bed frame; a slick and streamlined black electric lawnmower with an adjustable blade designed for mulch or side discharge from Peavey Mart; an Apple MacBook from London Drugs; a pack of Staedtler White Vinyl Erasers from Staples, because if I buy one I get one free. The desirability of these objects, and many more, is so easy to fall prey to because of the effective presentation employed by advertising campaigns. Many marketing promotions present an object, or set of objects, on a single toned background, such as white, green or blue, as if the object has been cut out of its original context in order to float precariously in space. Faced with this design strategy, consumers, such as me, can easily envision that product within our personal context, such as that bedroom set from Sears in my house, or that lawnmower cutting my grass. Some of these objects I would like to have but don't actually need; some of these objects are new and improved models of objects that I already possess; some of these objects I just simply want but cannot afford.

Contemplating my mixed emotions surrounding the desire to buy some of the objects that lie before me in the pages of these flyers, I started to question what exactly I wanted to buy, or in this case buy into. Many of the products portrayed within these advertisements present me with the possibility to buy into a new sense of social identity; the images imply that by owning that object, I will be a different person, belong to a higher socio-economic sphere, individuate myself from the rest of society, or simply feel better about myself through consumption. However, is it that realistic to put so much pressure on the objects that we own or want to own? I began to look at the mundane

objects that surround me and question the subjective relationship between myself and my possessions, and how they function as a construct of my personal identity. My original motivations and intentions behind the exhibition *Almost Everything* were to appreciate the objects that I possess, understand how the subjective narrative relationships of these objects can form the basis of my identity, and question the notion that we are what we own.

The work that comprises the exhibition *Almost Everything*, is designed to examine my individual relationships with my possessions through mimetic drawings of my own everyday objects. Like the previously mentioned advertisements, I have removed these objects from their original context, as a way to take stock, study, and get to know the items in themselves. The process of drawing acts as a visual and physical compilation of the objects that surround me: a specific, yet limited, world of objects. The creation of hand-crafted one-of-a-kind drawings is a conscious attempt to break the mechanical means of reproduction in which these products are created, by drawing attention to everyday objects and my own consumer behaviour. I've used drawing as my chosen rendering process over photography in order to display my hand in the making of the work, as well as the fact that drawings are not mass producible by hand without mechanical intervention.

By simulating the desirability of my personal possessions through life size colour pencil crayon drawings, *Almost Everything* presents viewers with the potential to question the activities and processes that develop their own individual relationships to their possessions by experiencing a visual form of my consumer behaviour.

Michael Landy's 2001 performance/installation *Break Down* (Plate 1), where he systematically itemized and then destroyed all of his 7,006 possessions, in what he called "the ultimate consumer



Plate 1. Michael Landy, *Break Down*
Installation detail, 2001, Photo credit -
James Lingwood ©.

choice,”¹ is a perfect example of a contemporary artist who made use of his own belongings in an attempt to draw attention to personal ownership, over indulgence and the significance of the individual as the foundation of today’s mass produced commodity



Plate 2. Michael Landy, *Break Down* Installation detail, 2001, Photo credit - Hugo Glendinning ©.

system. Furthering this consumer perspective, French theorist Jean Baudrillard proposes two central functions for every object: “to be put to use and to be possessed.”² As I

interpret Baudrillard’s ideas, not only can a thermos, a flashlight, a cork screw or scissors be used for their intended function, but they also become possessions that together form a larger collection representing my individual sense of identity. However, by obliterating his objects in order to break down consumerism, Landy neither puts his objects to use nor possesses them. Rather, he falls prey to the system that he originally set out to oppose by eventually and inevitably having to replace some, if not all, of his personal objects - putting himself in a position where he is forced to consume (Plate 2).

Understanding Baudrillard’s definition of functionality suggests a closer look at how people relate to everyday objects, and at the ways in which human beings assess and allocate worth in order to achieve subjective personally significant relationships with their possessions.³ According to Adriana Ionascu and David Scott, authors of *Common Objects, Common Gestures*, “Baudrillard’s object value system may not reflect the full complexity of our relationships with the things that facilitate our lives, and it is perhaps worth remembering that objects are made by ‘us’”.⁴ Homo sapiens have been creating objects for millennia, but for me ‘made by us’ suggests that hand made objects, such as drawings, function as a neutral way to assess, observe, explore, question and discover

¹ Michael Landy quoted in Rachel Withers, “Michael Landy – Break Down,” *ArtForum*, May (2001), http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_9_39/ai_75914317/.

² Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (London & New York: Verso, 1996), 92.

³ Adriana Ionascu and David Scott, “Common Objects Common Gestures,” *Ceramics (Sydney, Australia)*, vol. 68 (2007): 86.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.



Plate 3. Karla Griffin working on 1988 GMC Sierra SL 4.3L Pick-up Truck, 2009.

my objects, which supports my intention to appreciate the things that lie before me, rather than buy into the desire to needlessly consume.

Drawing allows me to strip a product of its use and function through my subjective interpretation of the original object.⁵ The drawing process also produces a secondary object: the drawing itself, which becomes a record, or in this case the “material registration of a conceptual process.”⁶ I view drawing as a very personally satisfying, exploratory and labour intensive practice (Plate 3), which can be compared to the purchasing process when considering that the objects that I choose to buy may in

fact form a basis of my identity. Robert G. Dunn explains that in modern western culture, individual and social formations of identity are rooted in the satisfaction of economic need and personal desire⁷ presenting the possibility that individual self worth - or in other words a sense of identity - is quite simply, yet strategically, dependent upon the exchange, use and acquisition of commodities.⁸ Baudrillard builds upon similar ideas through his belief that objects function as mirrors that provide us with desired images rather than real ones,⁹ which is why “owning absolutely any object is always so

⁵ Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 92.

⁶ Pamela M. Lee, “Some Kinds of Duration: The Temporality of Drawing as Process Art,” in *Afterimage: Drawing through Process*, exh. Cat., ed. Cornelia H. Butler (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, and Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1999), 41.

⁷ Robert G. Dunn, *Identifying Consumption: Subjects and Objects in Consumer Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹ Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 96.

satisfying and so disappointing at the same time.”¹⁰ This polarity of satisfaction followed by disappointment fuels a need to consume, which further buries me, and many others, into the seemingly endless commodity system. However, within Baudrillard’s theories about systems of objects, he fails to ask the question: what is it about

an object that we are attracted to in the first place, besides the function that it provides us? Personally, I am attracted to objects that I feel individuate myself from the people that surround me, which seems difficult to achieve while living within a system of mass production.



Plate 4. Kelly Wood, *Continuous Garbage Project: 1998-2003*
Installation detail, chromogenic prints, The Power Plant, 2004.



Plate 5. Karla Griffin, *Rubbermaid Roughneck Storage Tote*, pencil crayon on paper, 2009.

Kelly Wood’s photographic series *Continuous Garbage Project: 1998-2003* (Plate 4) is evidence of continuous consumption as well as personalizing herself through her refuse. Over a five year period, beginning with Vancouver’s garbage strike, Wood personalized her consumption by photographing her own waste in serial form, each item neatly placed on a white background, again referencing the advertising format of flyers. Wood’s work draws attention to economic concerns of consumerism, labour, and over consumption and looks at what she

¹⁰ Ibid., 92.

subjectively finds useless.¹¹ In order to individuate ourselves in a system of mass produced objects, we personalize our possessions through decisions concerning physical attributes such as buying new vs. used, choices in style such as colour, texture, makes of the same model, antiques, as well as the way that an object is packaged. By recontextualizing my own personal objects,



Plate 6. Karla Griffin, *Clinique Travel Case*, pencil crayon on paper, 2009.

similar to Wood itemizing her own waste, I am documenting the products of my consumption, as well as my process of individuating myself, as represented through the objects that I own, as well as by the objects that I have chosen to draw. Within some of the drawings, there is physical evidence of identity, such as the fact that these objects are used, some more than others. Drawings such as *Rubbermaid Roughneck Storage*



Plate 7. Karla Griffin, *Goody Ouchless hair elastic*, pencil crayon on paper, 2009.

Tote (Plate 5), *Clinique Travel Case* (Plate 6) and *Goody Ouchless hair elastic* (Plate 7) portray aspects of my interaction with the object, including the presence of duct tape, water marks, and in the case of the hair elastic, biological matter: hair is rendered as part of the object. As a whole, the drawings create a portrait of me, while at the same time heightening the desirability of the individual objects that the drawings portray. To some extent, I view the exhibition as advertising, or

selling, the appeal of my identity.

This of course raises questions concerning my selection process when considering objects to draw. Having recently moved from British Columbia to Saskatchewan, I was presented with the opportunity to spend time with each of my

¹¹ Kelly Wood's *Continuous Garbage Project: 1998-2003*, The Power Plant, Toronto, 2009, <http://www.culturekiosque.com/travel/item5381.html>.

possessions through the packing and unpacking process. During this time I started questioning why I had chosen to carry some of these objects with me over a 1,200 km distance. Some I didn't really use; some of them, such as the 1988 GMC Sierra Pickup Truck weren't even used for their intended function; rather than drive it, the truck was towed on a trailer behind a small moving van, which in retrospect seems absolutely ridiculous. Why keep it at all if it is no longer useful? These observations began my query into the idea that we are what we own; that together, these objects form narrative relationships that stand as portraits of my identity. Of course it is easy to be judgmental and only select objects that I find attractive or conducive to my drawing style, so I have tried to be diplomatic about the selection process: choosing objects that I find excruciatingly banal, difficult to draw or useless, while at the same time choosing objects that I find aesthetically pleasing and useful. Combined with the selection process, I approached the drawings as a way to render every object as being equal; each object has been depicted in the same way with the same amount of attention to detail, regardless of its function, size or how much I am or am not attracted to it as an object.

By placing each object in white space, I want to remove any sense of the personal hierarchy that I have created within my collection of objects. Without a reference to the physical world, I am challenging the idea that we are what we own, and questioning how I see myself and how others see me based on my possessions.

Christopher Muller's near life size colour photographs of cleanly arranged groups of everyday objects (Plate 8), play with narrative relationships based on emotional responses between the viewer and the objects within his



Plate 8. Christopher Muller, *A Good 12 Inches*, chromogenic print, 1991/97.
Christopher Muller ©.

photographs, creating what Muller calls “moments of self-awareness.”¹² The drawings represent my consumer identity. Each alludes to my individuality; however, having chosen many common objects, there is the possibility of representing a viewer’s consumer identity. In this case, similar to Muller’s work, the significance of each drawn object is dictated and decided by viewers, suggesting that the importance of things is rooted in individual personal experience and perspective.

Because the desirability or importance of the drawings is based on direct interaction with viewers, for many there will be no desired response elicited from my work at all, while for some there may be a sense of wanting, much like a reaction garnered from advertising campaigns. In this case, the desired response may be confused between the object that sits on the gallery wall: the drawn object, and the physical object that the drawing represents. Here, I am directly addressing the possibility of self-gratification and identity enhancement that I may have been tempted by when originally purchasing these objects. However, I am re-presenting that desire through the form and display of the drawings within the gallery. The physical act of drawing elevates the object to a seemingly higher level of importance which, like advertising, begs viewers for their attention. John Berger points out in *Ways of Seeing*, that advertising “proposes to each of us that we transform ourselves, or our lives, by buying something more;”¹³ however, buying something does not always reward us with the pleasure, desire, use, sense of self, or personal enhancement that we associated with that object in the first place. The drawings within the exhibition *Almost Everything*, offer the emotional pull of want, desire and consumption, similar to the function of advertisements, but they cannot offer the real object. Rather, they present us with “moments of self-awareness;”¹⁴ the opportunity to contemplate how we respond to, and build relationships with, the objects that we choose to surround us; and how these objects, whether we are conscious of it or not, function as part of our individual and social identities.

¹² Christopher Muller, in *The Measure of All Things: On the Relationship between Photography and Objects*, ed. Peter Weiermair (Zurich & New York: Edition Stemmle, 1998), 59.

¹³ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1972), 131.

¹⁴ Muller, in *The Measure of All Things: On the Relationship between Photography and Objects*, 59.

In today's technologically savvy culture, we consume an immensely high amount of images on a daily basis through many forms of distribution: television, print (news paper, flyers, billboards), and electronic means such as the internet and e-mail. Every aspect of our lives seems to be permeated by marketing campaigns aimed at teasing out our wants, needs, insecurities and desires. Taking advice from Leo Burnett, whose opinion on creative advertising prefaced this paper, I have attempted to use familiar objects in order to create new relationships, through drawing, between myself, my possessions and viewers of my work. If I have understood Baudrillard and Dunn's ideas surrounding the advertising of objects as a system of commodification and identity formation, then it would appear that objects are as dependent upon us, as we are on them.

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- Kelly Wood's *Continuous Garbage Project: 1998-2003*, The Power Plant, Toronto, 2009, <http://www.culturekiosque.com/travel/item5381.html>.
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Exhibition Installation Images





















